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THE SISTER-IN-LAW OF CICERO

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It is a healthy instinct that revolts against the unnecessary dragging into view of the comparatively unimportant littlenesses of prominent people. It is too much as if one should say, "I cannot be prominent. Go to, now! I will drag those who are so, down to my own level." And yet long lapse of time puts even the foibles of the great into the same category with the grocers' bills of the Egyptian papyri and the scurrilous wall inscriptions of the alleys of Pompeii as so much material for the solution of the problems of ancient civilization. As the ethnologist advances the study of medicine by digging up the bones of our prehistoric ancestors and subjecting them to various scientific tests to discover the nature of physical diseases to which they were subject, so the student of man in his social relations may apply the microscope to the bones of the Cicero skeleton preserved in the wonderful cabinet of the great orator's private correspondence, if perchance he may find there some suggestion on the modern problem of social prophylactics, *How to be happy though married*. Cicero himself did not handle the problem with complete success. We get no suggestion of any serious shadow over the earlier years of his union with Terentia, it is true, and he himself has given overwhelming evidence of her loyal and self-sacrificing efforts in his behalf during his year of banishment. But notwithstanding the ardent affection of his letters to her during this period, which was twenty years after their marriage, the fire in some way or other was cooled and twelve years later he divorced her, leaving on record in some of his correspondence a question of her honesty with him in money matters. Publilia, a woman of youth, beauty, and wealth, was taken almost immediately to the vacant place. If Plutarch was not misinformed it was Terentia's opinion that her divorce was due to Cicero's previous susceptibility to these qualities in Publilia, and he himself

did not hesitate to write to a friend that he thought it right to repair by the faithfulness of the new connection the material damage suffered through the treachery of the old. If the divorce and remarriage were really the result of a culpable failure to control a vagrant tendency of his own affections in the presence of youth and beauty, the punishment came quick and heavy. Publilia could not so adjust herself to his moods as to bring him any real comfort, and was so jealous of his daughter Tullia, who could, as to fail to conceal her joy at Tullia's death. In grief and anger Cicero sent her away and repelled every attempt at reconciliation, taking upon his aging shoulders the burden of another dowry to return, in addition to the still unliquidated claim of Terentia.

It was of course before he had had all this bitter experience that he took the rôle of match-maker and arranged for the marriage of Pomponia, sister of his lifelong friend Titus Pomponius Atticus, to his own brother, Quintus. Cicero's deep affection for Atticus doubtless made this marriage seem to him the fittest thing imaginable. Atticus himself was born to go through the world smoothly. In spite of his wealth and influence he never allowed the violent political struggles of his time to drag him into their bloody vortices, and he had inherited a large fortune by his ability to be always on pleasant terms with his mother's brother, Quintus Caecilius, a man whose one outstanding quality, aside from an apparently active bump of acquisitiveness, was his almost hopeless inability to be got along with. His sister Pomponia was about of his own age, not the ideal condition to obviate serious clashes of opinion; and yet Nepos, who vouches elsewhere for the brother's rigid adherence to the truth, tells us that he testified on the occasion of their mother's funeral that never in life had there been any personal trouble between him and his sister. But Atticus was *sui generis* in suavity of disposition, and it is wholly possible that his sister Pomponia may have inherited from the Caecilii, through her mother, a bit of that *intransigence* which marked the old uncle. If so, Cicero gave to her in his brother Quintus the reagent necessary to set it in motion, on due occasion. Quintus Cicero had it in him to be hasty in more ways than one. On one occasion he wrote to his brother that he had written four tragedies in sixteen days, a feat

in itself enough to suggest that when he once set his mind on any course of action it might not be safe to get in his way. The orator had more than one occasion to caution him against undue violence of temper in dealing with those who came under his authority in his career as a provincial governor, and the echoes of the abuse which Quintus heaped upon the head of his own brother during a period of temporary estrangement come down through the ages with a very unpleasant ring. The conditions precedent to matrimonial bliss did not exist, and so the bliss itself failed to follow. The age of Saturn was too far past for grapes to grow on thorns.

We get the first hint of trouble in the very first (chronologically) of the collection of Cicero's correspondence which has come down to us, "As to what you say of your sister," he writes to Atticus, "she herself will bear witness how earnestly I have exerted myself that my brother's attitude to her should be what it ought to be." He had recognized the actual existence of serious trouble and had written Quintus a letter calculated "to placate him as a brother, to warn him as a younger man, and to chide him as the one in the wrong." Furthermore, he had had news which indicated that things were now going smoothly. A little later this assurance is repeated and again the next year, with the confirmatory evidence that the birth of an heir is expected. This heir, Quintus Cicero the younger, was the only child ever born to Pomponia. For years he was a delight to his uncle and a constant companion to the younger Marcus, his cousin, but later joined with his father in those bitter epistolary reproaches which we have mentioned. Doubtless for a time affection for him kept the discordant elements in his parents from clashing. At any rate no further sound of trouble reaches us until his fifteenth year. We then get a pretty complete picture of one of those family jars which, when they come down to us from ancient times, go so far to prove that in human nature there is nothing obsolete and little new. The whole thing might have occurred almost anywhere within the past week. Atticus had written to Cicero that there was trouble again between Quintus and Pomponia, and had asked him to intervene. The brothers had met near Arpinum and had a long conversation, gradually drifting around to the delicate subject of Pomponia. There had

been some suggestion of trouble over Pomponia's expenses, but no trace of it appeared in the words of Quintus. In short, Cicero reports to Atticus, "I have never seen anyone manifest a milder and more peaceful attitude toward another than my brother toward your sister on that day." On the next day they were to dine together at Arcanum, where Quintus possessed an estate and was giving an entertainment to his tenants. Let us have the orator's own account of what happened.

Quintus said to Pomponia, in the most kindly way, "You invite the women and I will call in the men." Nothing could have been more pleasant, I thought, and that too not merely in words, but in spirit and countenance as well. But she answered, right in my hearing, "Oh, I am nothing but a guest here." The reason for this conduct was, I suppose, that Statius had gone ahead to see to the arrangements for the dinner.

Let us interrupt with the statement that this Statius was a favorite freedman of Quintus whose influence over the latter was so marked as to cause serious concern to Cicero himself, as we learn from a number of letters. Pomponia may have had good reason to resent his prominence in household matters over which her position as wife gave her presumptive authority. But let Cicero go on with the story.

Then Quintus said to me, "See! That is what I endure every day." You will say, "What pray did that amount to?" It amounted to a great deal, and indeed it stirred me myself all up. She had answered him so absurdly and so harshly, both in looks and in words. I was grieved, but kept my grief to myself. We all took our places at the table except her. Quintus sent her some food from the table but she would have nothing to do with it. Why say much about it? Nothing seemed gentler than my brother, nothing harsher than your sister, and I pass over many things which I myself found it even harder to stomach than did Quintus. I went to Aquinum. Quintus remained at Arcanum, but came to me the next morning at Aquinum and told me that she had refused to pass the night with him, and when preparing to leave had displayed the same temper that I had seen. You may tell her to her face that in my judgment she showed herself lacking in kindness. I have gone into this matter at greater length, perhaps, than was necessary, but I wanted you to realize that you too have something to do in the way of training and admonishing.

Evidently Pomponia was irritable and pettish, but we may well believe that when there was no outsider to look on, Quintus was

not quite so conciliatory toward her temperamental weaknesses as Cicero found him on this occasion. There is too much evidence in other letters that his quick temper was not habitually kept under such careful control. The family life was doubtless one of constant nervous strain, with frequent "flare-ups" when the tension became too strong. And an ex-slave with so strong an influence over the husband as to cause talk on the outside could not possibly have authority delegated to him over the wife's head in matters of household management without increasing the number and intensity of these explosions. Whether the constant efforts of Cicero and Atticus to relieve the situation did more good than harm cannot be decided. Both of them were natural-born peacemakers, but intervention in domestic broils has never had a very high percentage of permanent success to its credit. A little later than the outbreak above described, we learn that Quintus, the son, was very greatly disturbed over the contents of a letter from Atticus to his father concerning the family difficulties. The letter had been delivered in his father's absence and he had opened it on the chance that it might refer to some matter of business needing immediate attention. Soon after this he and his uncle united in a temporarily successful effort to re-establish harmony, but the temperamental incompatibility was too deep-seated for excision. Within the next five years the son himself became bitterly estranged from the mother. We can hardly blame him for getting his teeth badly on edge, after the diet of acid grapes on which the parents had been so long feeding. "I had wished," he writes to his father, "that a house should be rented for me in order to be with you as much as possible, and I had so written to you. You have neglected to do so and consequently we shall see much less of one another. I cannot bear the sight of *your* house and you know the reason why." That the presence of the mother was the reason referred to is not a mere inference but was explicitly stated by the father to his brother. A little later, in a mood of apparent discouragement, Quintus bewails to his brother the war going on between son and mother and talks of giving up his house to his son, for whom a marriage with the daughter of Quintus Gellius Canus was under consideration; but these plans were never carried into execution.

Toward the close of this year (45 B.C.) or early in the next Pomponia was divorced, and now we find the wayward-minded son under reproach for taking sides with her against his father. Quintus had some trouble in raising money with which to repay the dowry received with Pomponia, but was relieved by a loan from an obliging friend. We now find the son seriously disturbed by the conviction that his father was planning an immediate remarriage, with a certain wealthy woman named Aquilia. He himself, however, declared that he had no such idea and that he found a solitary couch the most delightful state of existence imaginable. Young Quintus, however, was not wholly convinced of the sincerity of these protestations and wrote to his father a very bitter letter, the substance of which, Cicero tells Atticus, was that he simply would not endure Aquilia as a stepmother. He was not put to the test. The play was rapidly drawing to an end. In the excitement and confusion of the months which saw the murder of Julius Caesar and the varied social and political consequences of that event, the divorced Pomponia drops permanently out of sight. During the terrible proscriptions of the Triumvirate her husband and son, united at last, fall bravely side by side at the behest of Antony, each asking to be slain before the other. It had been a stormy life for all three. Which one possessed the greater share of the undisciplined human nature which lay at the root of their unhappiness we can hardly determine.